Electric Sheep

INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH KENNETH ANGER

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Director: Kenneth Anger

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The BFI have recently released the *Magick Lantern Cycle*, a collection of 10 short films by the legendary Kenneth Anger. The two-disc box-set includes his explosive debut, the violent gay fantasy *Fireworks* (1947), the beautiful water dream *Eaux d'Artifice* (1953), the fetishistic hymn to the American biker *Scorpio Rising* (1964), the Aleister Crowley-inspired *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954) and the powerful, still dangerous evocation of counterculture through a Satanic ritual *Invocation of my Demon Brother* (1969). Kenneth Anger told *Electric Sheep*, *Flux* and *The Quietus* about using a Lutheran Sunday School film in *Scorpio Rising*, making a film about his neighbour Elliott Smith's suicide and how the Soviet Union built a 3D screen made up of a million piano wires.

Electric Sheep: Your films seem to have very strong elemental motifs, in particular fire and water, and they seem to define contrasting sides of your work. *Fireworks*, *Scorpio Rising* and *Lucifer Rising* use fire imagery and are full of dark energy while works like *Eaux d'Artifice* and *Rabbit's Moon* are more pensive, fluid poetic works that belong to the watery element. Do you see your work in terms of this opposition?

Kenneth Anger: I've got to have contrast, so I don't think I have two conflicting things in my psyche, it's just that the subjects I choose have those elements.

ES: Was there anything specific that influenced the making of the fire films or the water films?

KA: *Eaux d'Artifice* was made in the 50s, and the amazing thing is that I got permission from the Italian Department of Antiquities to film in the Villa d'Este gardens, which is about 30 miles outside of Rome. Of course they said, don't break any statues or anything *(laughs)*, which we didn't. But I don't know if they would grant that today. The Tivoli gardens have always been a tourist destination, and as I was filming I had the right to block off certain parts for half an hour. And usually it worked out fine, but a couple of times the American Express bus would come along and they would say, 'Let

us in, let us in, we're going to be late to see something else!' I just ignored them until I got my shot. It's very tricky filming with the sunlight, and the reason why the Tivoli gardens were so wonderful was that it's full of big cypress trees, which create wonderful dark shadows, so you have shafts of lights which are almost like theatrical spotlights coming down. I had to plan it all ahead according to the time of day. It's all day for night, shot with red filters on panchromatic stock. It's the only film of mine which has been chosen by the Library of Congress for preservation. I don't know what that means *(laughs)*, they haven't given me any money to actually do the preservation. They do have a copy of it though.

ES: Is it true that you found the dwarf lady in *Eaux d'Artifice* through Fellini?

KA: Yes, Fellini suggested her, I'd met him socially in Rome. I wanted to change the perspective, the scale of the film. She was a genuine midget, like a young child, only she wasn't a child. And she was wonderfully cooperative.

ES: Why did you want that change of scale?

KA: I don't know if you're familiar with a famous etcher, an artist named Piranesi who did wonderful etchings of the ruins of Rome and the Tivoli gardens and several other things as they were in the 18th century. But he changed the perspective on everything. For instance, he has a coach and chair and carriages in front of the ruins of the Coliseum, but the horses are the size of dogs, so everything seems much more grand. It's grand enough as it is, but even more so when you reduce the human scale. He did the same with the Tivoli Gardens, using small figures to expand it in a dream-like way, so I tried to capture that by using as reference a small figure. You can see when she comes down the stairs that her head is actually at the level where an adult hand should be, holding on to the balustrade, so it just changes the scale and it creates a kind of dream-like feeling.

The Quietus: I think you said *Fireworks* came from a dream. Do you often draw on dreams that you've had for your imagery?

KA: I can't because they'd be too expensive *(laughs)*. Oddly enough, my dreams very, very rarely have any speech, they're mostly just visuals, so in that way they're like my films.

ES: Is that why you have no dialogue in your films and you just use music?

KA: It started out of necessity because my early films were made with the family's home movie camera, which was a wind-up 16mm camera called a CineKodak that held 100 feet, and one shot would last for half a minute if you wanted to push it that far. But most of my shots were shorter than that anyway. So the challenge was to make films with silent images and not use speech. Then I decided I liked it as a technique, so most of my films are that way. I have made a film with the musician Elliott Smith. He was a friend of mine who committed suicide in October 2003 and I was able to film him before that happened, so I put together a little film, a tribute to him called *Elliott's Suicide*. That's one of my recent films.

The Quietus: How did you know him? Did you live next to him?

KA: Yes, we lived in the district of LA called Silverlake and we were neighbours. He used to play in a club, a little neighbourhood thing where there would be about 20 people, just for fun. He had a serious drug problem, then he had a fight with his girlfriend. She locked herself in the bathroom, which is a very bad thing for any girl to do in a quarrel, the symbolism is all wrong *(laughs)*. He went in the kitchen, opened the kitchen drawer, pulled out a steak knife and stabbed himself in the heart, which is really overdoing it. He was only 34, so we will never know what he could have produced, but he wrote some wonderful songs. There's one particular song that I used full-length in my film called 'Rose Parade', which goes 'follow me down to the Rose

Parade'. That's the famous parade in Pasadena every New Year's. He was from New York, but when he settled in California he used to go every year to the Rose Parade after being up all night and stoned. And so he would see it through that filter, I believe heroin – I never went with him so I don't know what he was on. But I understood that he used to enjoy watching it in that state. Anyway, I went back and filmed segments of the actual parade and I included them in the film.

ES: Many of your films have a great soundtrack. How did you choose the music for *Scorpio Rising*?

KA: They were the pop songs on the radio that year, 63. I knew these bikers, they weren't like Hell's Angels or anything like that, but they were a club, mostly Italian Americans living in Brooklyn, and they would have the radio playing as they were working on their cars or motorcycles. So certain songs I decided would make a good comment on the film. I had to clear all the rights. The budget was $8000 for a half-hour film, and clearing the music rights doubled it to $16000. The film was blown up to 35mm and shown all around the country with a couple of other films, so reluctantly I had to pay for the rights to the music even though I happened to think there's something called fair use for artists; they should be able to occasionally dip into pop music, particularly things that made a fortune in their usual way. I recently used the music of The Police, 'Every Breath You Take'. I titled my film *I'll Be Watching You*, and it's a tribute to my late friend Michael Powell and his 1960 film *Peeping Tom*, because it's also about voyeurism. It's also about the paranoia of our time, with surveillance cameras everywhere, certainly here in London, and I think most big cities have them now, as if anyone would be anxious to see a couple of sweethearts kissing or something *(laughs)*, but it's part of the 21st century.

ES: Do you feel your films always reflect the times that you live in? For instance, *Scorpio Rising*, which you famously described as a 'death mirror held to American culture' and

Invocation of my Demon Brother, which is very reflective of 1969, the year in which it was made.

KA: I hope so. I'm just part of the zeitgeist and the mood of that time. It's something I accept. I deliberately insert things that are reflective, like personalities – Marianne Faithfull, or a flash of Mick Jagger, when he held the tribute for Brian Jones (in Hyde Park in 1969). I attended that.

Flux: Did you feel you were being particularly brave at the time when you included homoerotic content in films like *Scorpio Rising* or *Fireworks*, or did you think that it was just something necessary?

KA: I just made the films the way I thought they had to be. There are some flashes of sensitive material in *Scorpio Rising*, but they're so brief that you blink and you miss them, they're three frames long. They're not subliminal because subliminal means something you absolutely can't see. The shortest thing you can do in a film is one frame, which is 1/24th of a second, which is actually quite slow and you can identify what it is.

ES: What was the reaction at the time to the homosexual imagery in these films?

KA: *Fireworks* was shown in 1947 at the Coronet Theatre in Los Angeles, which is a small, legitimate theatre where Charles Laughton was performing in Brecht's *Galileo* at the time. There was a midnight screening after the play and I had a good reaction, no police raid or anything. That's where I met Dr Kinsey, who was there doing interviews for his sex research volume on the human male. He offered to buy a print, the first print I sold to the Kinsey Institute at Bloomington, Indiana, and they still have it. It's in good condition, they don't rent it out that often *(laughs)*. And other people I met at the screening were James Whale, the director of *Frankenstein*, and Robert Florey, another famous director of interesting horror films, so it was a good experience. And then it was shown in San Francisco at the Museum of Art, without any trouble. It wasn't until I

had an early showing in London that an Indian woman wearing a sari got up and said, 'that film should be burned' and stormed out, but that was the only bad screening. Just a ripple effect.

ES: Did you have any problems with the censors in America?

KA: Well, *Scorpio Rising* was denounced – this is ironic – it was denounced at its first screening. It was running at a movie house for art films called The Cinema for a week, and some members of the Nazi Party came and they thought I was insulting their flag, which is quite true, even though you don't see much of it. So they phoned up the vice squad in LA anonymously and denounced it as porn or as obscene. The way it was in those days, this is 64, the police had to investigate if they had a complaint. They went there and without even watching the film they just seized it, and the poor manager of the theatre got arrested and had to be bailed out, so it was a bit of a fuss. But then it went to the California Supreme Court and a famous ruling came down about it, which applied to every film. It said, it has 'redeeming social merits', so it is acceptable. Of course this label has been used for all kinds of things since.

ES: Did you have any problems with Christians because of the parallels you establish between the bikers and Jesus?

KA: I used clips from a Lutheran Sunday School film called *The Last Journey to Jerusalem*, which was delivered to me by mistake and left on my doorstep when I was cutting *Scorpio Rising*. And I just kept it and then I cut it into my film, because I thought it was serendipity, a gift from the holy powers, whatever you want to call them, not necessarily the gods, but maybe a prankster. I saw the parallels between the leaders and the followers and cut a little bit of it in, and after the film was shown all around the country I got a letter from the Lutherans, saying, are you actually using our Sunday School film, it looks awfully familiar. And I said, yes, but it's called a fair use, and I said, you should be ashamed showing such clichés to children because to show a simpering

Jesus is not really helpful. Christianity has become so sanitised. I discussed this with Martin Scorsese, who did an interesting film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. There was a group of nuns in LA, the hip nuns as they were called. They got a copy of *Scorpio Rising* and they ran it. They said, 'oh we think it's very religious' *(laughs)*. They said thank you, I said, well thank *you (laughs)*.

The Quietus: I'm interested in your view on how society is much more polarised now. You would probably get more criticism now, people seem much quicker to jump onto something and say, this is offensive to me personally.

KA: I've never censored any of my own work, it's all part of a texture. You've probably heard of John Waters. He wrote a book called *Shock Value*. In his early films, like *Pink Flamingos*, with Divine, he deliberately put in shock. But I've never done that. He's had a rather surprising commercial success, turning his scenarios into musicals *(laughs)*. And his kind of offbeat sense of humour seems to appeal.

Flux: So there's no plan for *Scorpio Rising* the musical?

KA: No, although back in the days I got an offer from a small-time producer in Hollywood, because the title became famous and it was written about in *Newsweek Magazine* and *Time Magazine* and so forth. So he said, you've got a good title, why don't we remake it in 35mm feature length, only put in a romance, a boy-girl story *(laughs)*. And I said, well that wouldn't be *Scorpio Rising*, I'm sorry *(laughs)*. It might have turned out like something like *Easy Rider*, I don't know. But at the time I said thanks, but no thanks.

ES: What were your feelings when you saw *Easy Rider*? Did you feel that they had been influenced by your film?

KA: Well, I know they saw my film, and Dennis Hopper is a friend of mine, I've been friends with him and his circle, just casually, for years. The fact that they would pick up on pop songs for the soundtrack, that's just logical, particularly if you're a low-budget film, because it's cheaper to clear the rights.

ES: In a 1951 essay you published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, which is included in the DVD booklet, you discuss the fact that film is an imperfect medium. Do you feel that digital technology makes it less imperfect?

KA: Oh, the problem is never solved. I'm releasing my films on DVD now, but DVD is not forever and possibly in 20 years they'll be unplayable. Maybe some new thing will come along, maybe Blu-ray is the answer, I'm not sure whether you'll have something that is more permanent. But I prefer to think you could sort of rest with the idea of something fairly consistent surviving in a good state. But it is an impermanent medium – if you paint watercolours, you don't hang them where the sun will reach them and bleach out the colours – it's the same kind of thing. But I'm still fascinated with moving images and I'm happy that I've been able to do as much work as I have. Now I'm working on digital and I like it, it's simple and I do my coding on final console, which once you've mastered it, is easier than doing splices, waiting to dry, even though that has a certain contemplative quality.

Flux: Is there anything that particularly interests you in contemporary cinema?

KA: I like seeing action films that use CGI, just because it's something that I will never be able to afford, to see what people can do, and I can say, well I can get the same effect doing this and that. But now that they have all these tools everything has become more literal. I'm fascinated by 3D but I doubt I will ever make anything in 3D, because someone would have to loan me a camera and everything. I'm waiting for 3D without glasses. It's been here already for a short while. The Soviet Union had a 3D screen made up of a million piano wires in the 30s. It was perfect for a totalitarian regime

because the only way you saw the illusion was if you sat absolutely rock solid and stared straight ahead. If you moved your head this way or that way the whole thing disintegrated *(laughs)*, which would have been kind of interesting in itself. There were layers and layers of silver piano wires, and the screen weighed 20 tons, so it was built only once. But those damn glasses… there's something about them that is gimmicky, and you can't forget about them. And it's better that the person watching anything, play or film, forget about themselves, physically.